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Unity in Diversity: Anattā revisited

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I should like to begin my modest paper with a stanza from the epigraphy of the great Buddhist King of Cambodia (ancient Kambuja), which appears to me to be of great significance, providing as it does the metaphysical basis for the King’s social activities, among them the foundation of 102 hospitals around the kingdom – hospitals in which people belonging to all the four social classes received medical treatment (cikitsyā atra catvāro varpāḥ). There is a syntactic peculiarity in this stanza, which should not surprise us: though not confined to Buddhist Sanskrit, it is fairly common there:

anekadhāneka jāgatsu bhimo
'py āmaikatā tu sphaṁ asya satyā /
sukhāni duṣṭähāni yad āmabhājām
āmānyo adhitā suhṛdaye yadyē //

"Though the ātman is divided in various ways in various beings, he has realized its unity in a manifest fashion, since he has taken into his compassionate ātman the joys and sorrows of those who participate in the ātman".¹

Coming from one of the sons of the King himself, Prince Sūryakumāra who composed the Ta Prohm inscription of 1186 A.D. (Prince Virakumāra composed the Preah Khan inscription, and Queen Indradevi, the Phimeanakas inscription), this stanza cannot be so easily explained away in the name of Buddhist orthodoxy, as has sometimes been attempted.

We have to do here with Mahāyāna Buddhism, and we do find numerous parallels in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts. Among them, I will quote here what strikes me as the closest to this stanza, Mahāyānasūtraṇāsūkṣmā XIV, 37-41:

samskāramātram jagad etya buddhyā
nirātmakaṁ duṣṭhaviruddhimātram /
vihiyā yānasamayaātmadṛṣṭīḥ
mahāātmadṛṣṭīṁ śrayate mahārthāṁ //

¹ Professor Bhattacharya eminent scholar living in Paris.
² BEFEO VI, p. 53, st. XXV.
vināmadṛṣṭvā ya ihātmadṛṣṭvā
vināpi duḥkhena suduḥkhitaś ca/
sarvarthakartā na ca kākākākṣi
yathātmanaḥ svāmahiśāni kṛtvā
//
yo muktacittaḥ parayā vimuktyā
baddhaḥ ca gāḍhāṣyata-abhandhanaḥ /
duḥkhasya paryantam apiṣyamānāḥ
pravṛtyāt caiva karoti caiva
//
svaṁ duḥkhām udvadaṁ ihāsamartho
lokāḥ kutāḥ pādām anyaduḥkhām
janmaṁ karokāte tv acinto
viparyayāt tasya tu bodhisattvāḥ
//
yat prema yā vatsalatā prayogañ
saṁvṛteva akheḍaṁ ca jinaṁśajñānam
āścaryam etat paramañ bhaveṣu
na caiva saṁvṛtasaṁmānābhaṁvat
//

Because of time, I refrain from giving a full translation of this long but beautiful passage with a touch of Buddhist Sanskrit.² What is remarkable in these stanzas is that they bring out the opposition between the view of the little self and the view of the Great Self: the Bodhisattva, rejecting the view of the little self which is without meaning (anarthamaya), resorts to the view of the Great Self which has a great meaning (mahātmaṛṣṭvā śrayate mahārthāṁ). Thus, without the view of self, he has the view of Self (vināmadṛṣṭvā ya ihātmadṛṣṭvā). Without sorrow, he is not confined (vināpi duḥkhena suduḥkhitaś ca); although with thought delivered by supreme liberation, he is bound by a close and far-reaching bond (yo muktacittaḥ parayā vimuktyā baddhaḥ ca gāḍhāṣyata-abhandhanaḥ); he does not see the limit of his pain (duḥkhasya paryantam apiṣyamānāḥ). ‘The tenderness of the sons of the Victors towards creatures, their love, their occupation, their tirelessness, is the supreme marvel of the worlds! Or rather, No! since other and self are identical to them (saṁvṛtasaṁmānābhaṁvā).³

Should this text – and so many others! – which emphasize the unity of the Self beyond the wrong view of selves, be considered ‘more Brahmanical than Buddhist’, as some renowned scholars would have it?

By ‘Brahmanical’ these scholars mean especially ‘Upaniṣadic’, without, however, seeing the specificity of the Upaniṣadic conception of ātman, according to which the ātman is not an individual ego, neither identical with the psychophysical constituents of the individual or apart from them: it is not the ‘object of the notion ‘I’’ (ahampratyayavāsya), to use a later term.

Now, the Buddha’s so-called doctrine of anatta, as well as the Upaniṣadic doctrine of ātman, was propounded against the background of the opinions current in those days, which identified the ātman either with the whole of individuality or with one or other element of it. Thus we read in the Pāli Canon:

ye hi keci, bhikkhave, sāmaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā
anekavihitaṁ attāṁ samanupassānāṁ samanupassanti
sabbe te pācchupadānakkhandhe samanupassanti etesāṁ vā
aññātāram.⁴

And from the earliest Upaniṣads we learn how the Asura Virocana (in the Chāndogya) goes away content with the conception of ātman as the body, while the god Indra (in the Bhādārāyaka) and the favourite wife of Yājñavalkya, Maitreyī (in the Bhādārāyaka), see the ātman in the most precious element of individuality, consciousness, and in the cessation of consciousness the destruction of themselves (vināśam evāṁ tathāyo bhavati).⁵

The Upaniṣadic ātman, identical with the brahman, is not an individual substance, a ‘soul’, but the Being itself, the universal, absolute Consciousness beyond the subject-object split – the transcendent Impersonality which man realizes through the negation of his individuality.

But, while the Upaniṣads placed the emphasis on ātman and speculated on it, the Buddha placed it on anatta, what is not the ātman; for his prime object was liberation:

seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, mahāsaṁuddo ekaraso īnaparasi
evam eva kho, bhikkhave, ayaṁ dhammavānayo ekaraso
vimittirasa ‘As the ocean has but one flavour, the flavour of salt, so, monks, this doctrine and this discipline have but one flavour, the flavour of Deliverance’.⁶

³ Sāntippa-Nikāya (PTS) III, p. 46.
⁴ Chāndogya-Upaniṣad VIII, 8; VIII, 11; Bhādārāyaka-Upaniṣad II, 4, 13; IV, 5, 14
⁵ Cullavagga IX, 1, 4 (Vinaya II, p. 239)
The usual expression of anattā in the Pāli Canon is this:

\[ \text{yad anicca} \ \text{taṃ dukkhaṃ; yaṃ dukkhaṃ taṃ anattā; yaṃ anattā taṃ n'etam mama, n'eso ham asmi, na m'eso attā ti evam etam yathābhūtaṃ sammappadīgha daññhabbaṃ 'what is impermanent (anicca) is painful (dukkha); what is painful is anattā; and of what is anattā one should understand through right knowledge: 'This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my ātman.'} \]

Now, when one is attached to what is painful, namely the constituents of our individuality – the khandhas/skandhas, saying: 'This is mine, I am this, this is my ātman', Can one understand one's misery and liberate oneself from it? yO nu kho dukkhaṃ allino dukkhaṃ upagato dukkhaṃ ajjhosito dukkhaṃ etat maṃ, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā ti samanupassati, api nu kho so sāmaṇṇaṃ vā dukkhaṃ parijāneyya dukkhaṃ vā parikkāheyya vihareyya. The answer is, evidently, No!

Furthermore, to seek to know the ātman is to make of it an object and thus never to know it in truth. As the great Vedānta philosopher, Śāṅkara, more than a thousand years after the Buddha, said, after a long discussion on the ātman's not being an object (avishayata), tasmāt jāne yutto na kartavyaṃ kiṃ tv anātmany ātambahuddhiniyyatā eva 'therefore, one should not make an effort for knowledge (of the ātman) but only for the cessation of the notion of ātman in what is non-ātman (anātman).

Here, then, is an illustration of the theme of Unity in Diversity. There is no opposition between ātman and anattā: the difference lies in the emphasis.

There are positive expressions relative to ātman in the Pāli Canon: brahmabuddhikkhe na anātmanā viharati, and so on.

These expressions can be explained away in some way or other, as they have been by both ancient and modern authors. But it would be hard to explain away the couple of viññāṇa passages in the Dīgha and Majjhima-Nikāyas. They recall the Upaniṣadic doctrine, so much so that V. Trenckner, the editor of the first volume of the Majjhima-Nikāya, attributed the words of the Buddha to his adversary, at the expense of absurdity, of course.\(^6\)

\(^6\) See K. Bhattacharya, Some Thoughts on Early Buddhism with Special Reference to its Relation to the Upaniṣads (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1998), pp. 27-28.

The Theravāda tradition did not commit any such error; however, in its eagerness to isolate Buddhism from the Upaniṣadic tradition, it largely obscured the issue by considering viññāṇa merely as a 'name for nibbāna' (nibbānassa nāma), in the sense of 'something to be preeminently known' or 'something to be known through a preeminent means' (viññāṇaṃ ti viññāṇam, viññāṇam ti viññāṇitabbaṃ, viññāṇena viññāṇabbaṃ).

In the Kevaddhasutta of the Dīgha-Nikāya we read:

\[ \text{viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantasabbotabhaṃ/ ettha āpo ca paññatā tejo vāyo na gādhahi //} \]
\[ \text{ettha dīghaṃ ca rassuś ca aśamp-thālam suḥsūbhaṃ/ ettha nāmaṃ ca rāpo ca ahaṃ ca aparihānaṃ //} \]
\[ \text{viññāṇapassa nirodhaṃ ettha ātamanarughati /} \]

There are numerous parallel passages in the Pāli Canon which suggest that nibbāna is being spoken of. But here nibbāna is called viññāṇa ‘infinite and universal’ (anantasabbotabhaṃ).

The majority of modern scholars, starting from Eugène Burnouf, the great master of Buddhistology in the 19th century, have confused the two viññāṇas mentioned in this passage. But on this point, at least, Buddhaghosa is illuminating: the first viññāṇa, which is anantasabbotabhaṃ, refers to nibbāna, while the second is our phenomenal consciousness (sārīra-avijnāṇa, pi abhisamkhāra-vijnāṇa).

It is with the cessation of this phenomenal viññāṇa that all the empirical realities, including our individuality (nāmaṃ ca rāpo ca, cease in the other viññāṇa (viññāṇapassa nirodhaṃ ettha ātamanarughati).

Does this not recall Yājñavalkya’s teaching in the Bhadrarāyakaka-Upaniṣad, that ātman is a ‘homogeneous mass of consciousness without inside and outside’ (anantaro bāyiḥaḥ kṣetraḥ praṇānāghana [viññāṇaghana] eva) and that ‘after Deliverance there is no consciousness’ (na pretya saṃvijñāti: pretya he here, according to the context means not ‘after death’ but ‘after Deliverance’, as some ancient commentators, among them Śāṅkara’s disciple Sureśvara also

\(^10\) See K. Bhattacharya, Some Thoughts on Early Buddhism with Special Reference to its Relation to the Upaniṣads (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1998), pp. 27-28.

\(^11\) Ibd., p. 26 ff.
saw)? As Śaṅkara makes it perfectly clear, saṃsajñā here means viśeṣasamajñā or viśeṣavijñāna 'particular (individual) consciousness'.

But while in the Upaniṣads we find long developments of this and other ideas, the Buddha’s words are confined to some concise statements. What is this difference due to? The answer, again, is the same as before. As a Japanese scholar, Ryukan Kimura, put it long ago,

From a perusal of such identical expressions as we come across in both [the Pāli texts and the Upaniṣads], we may hold that in a certain sense Buddha’s Ontological perception…does not surpass the ideas of the Upaniṣads. But the difference between them is the different way of realization; that is to say, the way of realization of Upaniṣads is philosophical, while Buddha’s way is a religious one.

Now, a question is sometimes asked: If the Buddha adopted the ontological position of the Upaniṣads, how could he be the founder of a religion that has been regarded as ‘heterodox’? A vain question, in reality, since the division between ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heterodoxy’ is not so rigid in India as it is thought to be. The criterion of orthodoxy in India is the acceptance of the authority of the Veda, and the Upaniṣads, to the extent that they accept that authority, remain ‘orthodox’; but, at the same time, in their opposition to the Vedic lore and ritualism, they are on the highway to ‘heterodoxy’ — so much so that Śaṅkara once exclaimed, citing Manu: yā vedabāhyoḥ ca kāś ca kudṛṣṭaḥ / sarvāḥ tā nisphalabh pretya tamoniṣthā hi tāh smṛtāḥ /

In one of the oldest Upaniṣads, the Chāndogya (VII, 1, 3), the ātmavādī is placed higher than the mantra-vādī, and a middle Upaniṣad, the Mūṇḍaka, where also we encounter for the first time the term Vedānta ‘end of the Veda’ to designate the Upaniṣads, distinctly relegates the Vedic lore to an inferior level by calling it aparā vidyā ‘inferior science’, as opposed to the parā vidya ‘superior science’ represented by the Upaniṣads. Later Hinduism carries this tendency further: the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava scriptures (Agamas, Saṃhitās) themselves are called the ‘root Veda’ (mūlaveda) — the ‘root of the great Veda tree’ (mahato vedavyāṣasya mūlabhūtah), of which the Rgveda and others represent the trunk and branches (skandhabhūtā rguḍyās te sākhābhūtās tathā).

12 Ibid., p. 28.

Neither the Buddha nor Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism, adopted these procedures. They do depend, in their teachings, ‘on the traditional typology, while the orientation is entirely different’ — to borrow an expression of Jean Daniélou, in an entirely different branch of history of religions. But they totally rejected the authority of the Veda. Herein lies the border line between ‘orthodoxy and heterodoxy’ — a further illustration of ‘unity in diversity’.

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